

A Policy Analysis for Decision Makers

February 9, 1995

HOW STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS CAN RESTORE DISCIPLINE AND CIVILITY TO AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

ITEM: "Twenty percent of high school students now carry a firearm, knife, razor, club or some other weapon on a regular basis."¹

ITEM: According to the National League of Cities, school violence during the past year resulted in student death and injury in 41 percent of American cities with a population of 100,000 or more.²

ITEM: "In 1991, 134,000 teenagers used cocaine once a week or more and 580,000 teenagers used marijuana once a week or more. In addition, 454,000 junior and senior high school students were weekly binge drinkers."³

ITEM: Approximately 900 teachers throughout the nation are threatened with bodily harm, and nearly 40 teachers are physically attacked, each hour of the school day. Some 160,000 students miss school daily because of intimidation or fear of bodily harm.⁴

ITEM: A 1993 *USA Weekend* survey on school disruption revealed that nearly 40 percent of students nationwide think schools are unsafe.⁵ They are right to think so. It is reported that 2,000 students are physically attacked each hour of the school day; one in

1 Cited by Heritage Foundation Distinguished Fellow William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators: Facts and Figures on the State of American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 31.

2 Associated Press, "School Survey Finds Violence All Over; Big Cities Are Worst," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 1994, p. A-17.

3 Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, p. 42.

4 Associated Press, "100,000 Students Carry Guns, Teacher Group Says," *The Baltimore Sun*, January 15, 1993.

five students carries a weapon to school daily; nearly half of those students in the survey say they avoid school restrooms out of fear; and a full 63 percent say they would learn more if they felt safer.⁶ Some will never learn; at least 30 violent deaths occurred in the schools in the past academic year.⁷

Too many of America's public school teachers must perform under combat conditions. Worse, teachers too often have little support from local boards of education or school administrators. Yet, despite the barrage of disrespectful behavior on the part of unruly students and the lack of action from school authorities, America's classroom teachers more often than not make heroic efforts to educate America's youth.

While state legislators can take a strong hand in reforming public education through school choice, charter schools, and other measures designed to increase accountability to parents and students, state legislators also can play a vital role by restoring discipline, civility, and a traditional level of popular literacy.

Student disruption—frequently violent—is pervasive and too often tolerated in public schools, especially in urban areas. But a reading of today's newspapers shows the problem is not confined to inner-city schools. In one suburban area school system, two students threatened another with a knife; another student brandished a handgun in an altercation; another started a locker room fight that required county police involvement; another on three separate occasions illegally entered a restricted faculty planning area, where a staff member observed him stealing money from a wallet located in a teacher's briefcase. In another school, a bullet hole pierced an inner steel door through which a coach had just entered.

Newspapers and magazines, conversations in the teachers' lounge, and the proceedings of education conferences often record the appalling daily regularity of disrespectful behavior. Worse, there is a cultural acceptance of disruptive, defiant, insubordinate, and intractable behavior on the part of students, as though it naturally comes with the vocation of teaching. But very little teaching and learning can take place in an environment plagued by continual disruption.

Unfortunately, too many parents and public officials think the situation in their schools is just fine. It is not. Washington-Baltimore school systems typify those found across the national landscape. The area has its share of urban, suburban, and rural schools, each with its share of hard-working, dedicated professionals. Yet scores of parents, educators, and lawmakers over the years have expressed their concern with the many examples of abysmally bad behavior and lack of respect by students, plus poor administrative handling of disruptive cases, throughout the schools. A local community college president recently advised lawmakers that fully 82 percent of one system's high school graduates who attend the college require remedial mathematics; six out of ten first-year students need remedial writing and reading classes. Not surprisingly, the lawmakers expressed concern that "We are passing a lot of kids just to make them feel good instead of teaching them what they need to know." Another lawmaker remarked, "We shouldn't be

5 Leslie Ansley, "Safety in Schools: It Just Keeps Getting Worse," *USA Weekend* magazine, August 13-15, 1993, pp. 4-6.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Mary Jordan, "Inside Schools, the Weapons Tally Rises," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1993, p. A3.

graduating kids who can't read or do the math necessary to get into college.”⁸ This has become a familiar refrain echoed repeatedly by parents, educators, employers, and lawmakers across the nation.

Given what is tolerated daily in the nation's public schools, it is no surprise that so many youngsters exit the public high school lacking even some of the most basic skills. Substantive teaching and learning occur only in an atmosphere that contributes to study and concentration in a consistent fashion. Students for whom there is no social stigma in abdicating personal responsibility and behaving poorly need to be restrained; and while the nation should not give up on these students, neither should they remain in schools and poison the atmosphere for those who want to learn, want to succeed, and want to get involved in the total school program.

Given the failure of too many schools to deal with disruptive student behavior, state legislators and local officials should enact measures to ensure discipline, civilized behavior, and school accountability in educating the young. Specifically:

- ✓ **Use** breathalyzer tests to combat alcohol use on school grounds.
- ✓ **Establish** procedures for greater parental involvement in schools and make parents directly accountable for their disruptive students.
- ✓ **Remove** disruptive boys or girls from the classroom and establish special programs for habitually disruptive students.
- ✓ **Establish** clear and unambiguous codes of school discipline and make sure that school administrators enforce them.
- ✓ **Hire** adequate security personnel to protect schools. Employ those whose experience, training, and education are in law enforcement or security.
- ✓ **Employ** retired military personnel for classroom teaching positions and to assist school administrators with programs for errant youths.

Beyond these specific recommendations, state lawmakers and local school boards should exercise stronger oversight over the public schools with a view to making sure they are safe. In particular, they should make sure that schools are properly staffed, with adjustments in personnel to deal with schools where violence and breaches of discipline are a problem; that administrators do not attempt to pad statistics or hide the extent of school violence and disruption; and that the extent of these disruptions is reported accurately. State legislators, in particular, can exercise the power of the purse to enforce discipline in public schools where it has broken down. One possible remedy is to cut off state funding to local districts that refuse to establish a clear and consistent disciplinary policy requiring expulsion of students who bring guns to school or demonstrate a repeated propensity for disruptive and violent behavior.

8 Dan Beyers, "Schools Get Poor Grade," *The Washington Post*, December 9, 1993, p. A1.

High school attendance is involuntary in every state of the Union, so taxpayers have a right to expect state and local officials to do their duty and give their children a safe environment in which to learn. Teachers have a right to teach, and students have a right to learn, free from violence, harassment, gutter language, and other verbal abuse and disruption. For poor parents and students who are practically denied a choice of educational options, making it more difficult for them to escape failing and violent schools, the obligations of state and local officials take on an even greater urgency.

CHAOS VERSUS LEARNING IN THE SCHOOLS

Public school administrators and classroom teachers are familiar with the daily frustration of students who have to cope with classroom disruption caused by the defiant behavior of their classmates. These same conscientious students frequently say their success in high school is achieved in spite of violence, friends drinking on weekends, others "doing drugs," and classmates who "caused problems all the time for teachers." Many students, indeed the vast majority, are well-mannered, caring, and involved in school activities. But the fact remains that American schools continue to "graduate" a deplorably high number of young people who are personally unaccountable, have no sense of who they are, and genuinely feel that the world somehow owes them a living. Ironically, too many administrators and educators reinforce negative attitudes and traits, promoting social irresponsibility among their students through weak to nonexistent disciplinary policies, minimal expectations, and tolerance of bad behavior.

While many school systems do have policies that address cursing, verbal abuse, and sundry other disruptive behaviors, these policies often are ignored or enforced in a weak or inconsistent fashion. Worse, many administrators concerned with the image of a school or school system fear that it might be tarnished if they admit to serious problems or have too many suspensions. The *Washington Post* last year quoted a high school principal who revealed that his attempts to suspend or expel disruptive students were thwarted by administrators concerned about a high suspension or expulsion rate:

The students perceived they could do what they wanted, when they wanted, without consequences. The core of the students and their parents were there for what education is all about. It was the minority who were bent on disrupting the educational process, and the system was unwilling to take a stand that students have a right to an education, but not to disrupt the process.⁹

The integrity of the educational program is vitiated further by weak administrators in schools and central offices who tolerate uncivilized behavior, regardless of the need for disciplinary action, to avoid suspending high numbers of specific ethnic groups, such as black males. In Maryland, for example, the state teachers association recently cited the case of a superintendent who "clamped down on suspensions of disruptive students, under pressure from a community faction claiming racial bias."¹⁰ Too often, those responsible for disrupting the educational process are not removed promptly so that faculty and students can be assured of an atmosphere conducive to teaching and learning.

⁹ Retha Hill, "P.G. School Aims for Turning Point," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 1993, p. B1.

¹⁰ "Safety First at Every School," *ActionLine*, Maryland State Teachers Association, December 1993, p. 6.

More relevant than sheer numbers is whether suspensions are the result of racial prejudice or nothing more than a higher rate of suspendable infractions. State legislators and school officials must discuss this issue honestly and openly. Far too many public officials simply cannot or will not broach the topic because of the dreaded "R" word (racism). The problem of disruptive students, far more common than student violence in schools, falls squarely on the shoulders of those students and their parents or guardians. Their race or ethnicity is irrelevant. Their behavior, left unchecked, interrupts every other student's right to obtain an education and every teacher's right to teach. Many black parents who have raised responsible, sensitive, and industrious children correctly view as unfair the tendency among school administrators to regard an entire minority as needing to be treated differently. Such labelling may be "politically correct" for some adults, but it is the kiss of death to those youngsters who most need to learn that disruptive behavior is irresponsible, unacceptable, and self-defeating. Notes Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT):

The mere fact that there is a disparity between referrals of white and black students does not mean there is discrimination. The question is whether a particular teacher was justified in referring a particular student for discipline, and you can't answer that by looking at their races. We don't base parking tickets on the race of the driver, and we can't use it to decide questions of school discipline.¹¹

The irony of high public school suspension statistics is that the numbers actually understate the level of antisocial and violent behavior in many schools. The total generally would be higher were it not for the fact that so many administrators have become tolerant of rude and disruptive behavior and fail to correct it. A state teachers association likewise cites a classroom teacher who says students are not being held accountable for disruptive behavior which is ruining the school system and sacrificing the vast majority of young people for the sake of public relations.¹²

Of course, teachers appreciate immensely the vast majority of students of every racial and income group who are genuinely positive and wholesomely involved in their schools. Any visitor to any local public school can see these children in a classroom, in a gymnasium, or on an auditorium stage, actively learning from a dedicated teacher. But the reality is that for many teachers, young and old, the noble commitment to working with and teaching children is less noble when undermined by disruption, disrespect, and even criminal behavior. It has become increasingly difficult to teach Chaucer, Spanish verb conjugations, thermodynamics, and even rock-climbing and food and nutrition while simultaneously having to cope with students who reek of marijuana or give the appearance of being on other drugs or use a vulgar expletive as a matter of course. It is hard to teach while trying to work with children who lack basic skills but have been placed in the class anyway, trying to reach the unmotivated child, attempting to handle a locker theft, deciding how best to resolve a fight, or figuring how to respond to false fire alarms that evacuate the entire building.

11 Albert Shanker, "Discipline by the Numbers," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 16, 1994.

12 "Safety First at Every School," p. 7.

THE SURRENDER BY TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Frustrated parents frequently ask whether there is anything the school system can do to help with their runaway teen, their drug-dealing son, or their daughter who has been a truant for 39 days and is thought to be working as a prostitute in a major city. To be sure, the wholesale use of profanity and general disrespect in many classrooms is of grave concern to teachers and administrators. But too often they are driven to ignore or even tolerate disruption and abuse that years ago, in a more ordered, civilized society, would have been considered deviant and unacceptable.

Too many teachers, for example, do not use the allotted time for a daily period of instruction because of the number of troubled youngsters in the class. Instead, with the full knowledge of school administrators, they will end the instruction and give students "time outs," allow them to eat in class, or just dismiss them to the school corridors where they are accountable to no one. Likewise, many teachers and administrators allow aggressive student arguments to ensue without immediately correcting their students. A 1993 study for the National School Boards Association noted the inability of a growing number of students to communicate with one another when an argument arises. "Mouthing off" quickly turns uglier, too frequently resulting in physical violence, cites the survey of 1,100 administrators.¹³

Commenting on one high school, another state teachers association bulletin states that the discipline situation is "far worse than has been reported, and it is getting worse daily." The school's department chairperson further states that "an attempt has been made to put a positive spin on the problem of severely disruptive students by calling them merely misguided youth. Unfortunately, we are not talking about students who chew gum in class or call out instead of raising their hands or even students who cut class occasionally." The "misguided youth" at this author's school have set two students' hair on fire; squirted a fire extinguisher at a teacher; thrown batteries, pennies, chalk, books, or anything else at hand at staff members; savagely assaulted other students; brought guns and drugs to school; and verbally assaulted many, if not most, of the teachers in the building. They have vandalized the building, as well as property in the surrounding neighborhood. They roam the building all day long in packs of five to twenty with seeming impunity. Good students are trying to transfer, while good teachers want to retire or resign. The sad thing is that this school is probably not as bad as some others.¹⁴

The myopic, inept handling of student disruption—rampant throughout far too many school systems—is dangerous. It is a disservice to everyone with a stake in public schooling, including the majority of earnest, hard-working students and dedicated faculty, staff, and parents who daily demonstrate their concern. Moreover, those students bent on breaking the rules with relative impunity hurt themselves, not just those around them. It is not surprising that they go on to commit still more serious acts. These students

13 Xavier University Survey on "School Violence" for the National School Boards Association, cited in *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1993, p. A-3.

14 "Safety First at Every School," p. 6.

will continue to expect the same tolerance from future employers (they will not get it) or professors, never really understanding or caring that they exact a hardship on society.

RESPONDING TO THE COLLAPSE OF DISCIPLINE AND CIVIL BEHAVIOR

The bad behavior and loss of respect exhibited daily in America's public schools indicate an institution in deep trouble. Problem-plagued school systems and schools with poorly written and poorly enforced policies on behavior typically exhibit an education mission that seems amorphous, allowing an erosion of tradition and sensible expectations over time. The academic culture has been subverted by a kind of silent chaos. William J. Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education and a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, says education has deteriorated in America because "our schools were systematically, culturally deconstructed. They were taken apart. Many of the things which mattered most in our schools were removed, and they were set adrift."¹⁵ This would include the notion that schools teach behavior that encompasses a moral dimension. But the tolerance of bad behavior indicates that too many school officials have bought into this deculturalization. Professor William K. Kilpatrick of Boston College cites a national study of 1,700 sixth- to ninth-graders that revealed a majority of the boys considered rape "acceptable" under certain conditions. Astoundingly, many of the girls agreed. He goes on to note that there are many reasons for the immorality of these young people, "but none more prominent than a failed system of education that eschews teaching children the traditional moral values that bind Americans together as a society and a culture." He adds that "Teaching right from wrong has as much bearing on a culture's survival as teaching reading, writing, or science."¹⁶

At least private sector leaders are trying to reverse these sorry trends. Actor Tom Selleck, former Texas Democratic Representative Barbara Jordan, and Michael Josephson, founding head of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, recently formed the Character Counts Coalition. It is comprised of 27 culturally and politically diverse groups claiming to represent some 20 million children. Says former Congresswoman Jordan:

If we are successful, we are going to make character the No.1 call of young people in this country. They are going to think before they act because they know that if they do the wrong thing, that there are consequences, and they may not like these consequences. Kids now must understand that they are responsible for making sure that young people know what is expected of them.

According to the Josephson Institute, American youth consistently list their parents as their primary role models—and their teachers second. "This means," Mr. Selleck adds, "that parents and teachers have the moral authority to persuade, encourage, and inspire the best in young people."¹⁷

15 William J. Bennett, "The War Over Culture In Education," *Heritage Lecture* No. 341, September 5, 1991, p. 2.

16 William K. Kilpatrick, "Teach the ABC's of Morality," *The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, July 23, 1993, p. A11.

17 William Raspberry, "Honor Thy FOGIES," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 1993, p. A 31.

Some private sector leaders are seeking structural changes in the school system, in part to address behavioral problems. Corporations are growing frustrated that substantial aid to schools has not produced the desired results. "School improvement? There wasn't any," said Ferdinand Colloredo-Mansfeld, a real estate executive who headed the Boston Compact, a group of companies which provided jobs and scholarships to every Boston high school graduate. Seeing no change in the abysmally poor performance of the city's schools, the Compact resorted to a "get-tough" position. Businesses began to demand changes, including dispersment of the central bureaucracy, implementation of school choice, and empowerment of teachers and parents.¹⁸

"The public schools don't work worth a damn," declared Joseph F. Alibrandi, Whitaker Corporation CEO in Los Angeles, after years of trying to assist schools in the 1980s. "Band-Aids won't work anymore," he added. "We need a total restructuring."¹⁹ There are even school systems that have turned the running of specific failing schools over to private corporations. Several states have experimented with school choice in an effort to change the dynamics of the public schools. Significantly, those most affected by the breakdown of public education voice the greatest support for choice. Some 72 percent of minority Americans and 61 percent of the public overall have indicated support for a program that would allow parents to choose the public schools that students attend.²⁰ Others seek to change the collapsing culture of public schools by creating charter schools, which are public schools custom-designed by groups of teachers, parents, or outside individuals to meet specific education needs.

Each of these ideas—as well as the array of social programs that public school bureaucracies themselves have entertained over the years—has been an attempt to improve a system that has failed a generation of youngsters. That so many American parents are seeking radical changes in the way public schools are run underscores an abject disillusionment with the current system.

But public schools also need the attention of public authorities, most especially the state and local legislators who fund and authorize public school programs. State legislators and local officials can and should institute clear, tough, and consistent disciplinary procedures if student behavior and achievement are to improve.²¹

Three principles must characterize specific actions:

18 Gary Putka, "Lacking Good Results, Corporations Rethink Aid to Public Schools," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 1989, p. 1.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Carol Innerst, "Minorities Overwhelmingly Favor Public School Choice," *The Washington Times*, August 24, 1990. According to a *Business Week*/Louis Harris Survey on the subject of school choice conducted between August 26-31, 1992, 69 percent favor choice and only 29 percent oppose it. Not surprisingly, in many state polls (Indiana, Georgia, Louisiana, Illinois, and Michigan) conducted since 1991, black Americans support school choice, including private school choice, more than white Americans.

21 For a variation of these recommendations, see Stephen Wallis, "It's Irresponsibility in Schools, Not Race," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 7, 1993, p. 4B.

✓ **Disruptive and violent behavior gets zero tolerance.**

State legislators and local officials should acknowledge what many taxpaying citizens already know: that too many school system policies on student discipline are written more to avoid legal entanglements than to send the clear message that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. Citizens of every racial, ethnic, and income group believe the education profession has caved in to pressure from parents who themselves have failed to instill basic discipline in their children. Students, likewise, daily see the hypocrisy in weak educators or policies that passively condone aberrant behavior. This must be replaced with the knowledge that anti-social behavior is not acceptable.

✓ **Discipline is even-handed, regardless of race.**

Administrators should not retreat so quickly from disciplining students who resort to race to rationalize their failures or to justify the successes of others. While people of every color recognize the scourge of racism, the false rationale of victimization is used increasingly by politicians and interest groups, as well as parents and students, who are quick to make race the issue, regardless of the substantive facts, in any case of school discipline. But with fundamental rights come fundamental responsibilities. For students and parents alike, there is a responsibility to contribute wholesomely and positively to American society.

✓ **Strong discipline contributes to personal growth and personal freedom.**

Students should be taught that discipline is a kindness to them and a source of their personal empowerment. Youngsters ought not be denied the opportunity to understand and experience discipline as another way to promote growth, cultivate personality, and effect positive change in their lives. The sooner administrators recognize the vital role that schools play in this area, the sooner students will begin to feel a sense of security often lacking in their own families and communities. To deny youngsters the opportunities that result from wholesome discipline, as schools now do, serves only to perpetuate an unrealistic and troubling view of life for those entering adulthood.

By contrast, the notion of “self-esteem” as a sunny, “feel-good” exercise is fast undermining real education, self-discipline, and achievement. It is largely false and obscures the need for students to work hard, demonstrating perseverance and understanding honesty, responsibility, opportunity, and possibilities, to achieve success.²² Every school should be characterized by the warmth, security, and meaningful work conducive to academic achievement and extracurricular participation. Instead, too many schools perpetuate the unseemly, sometimes sordid behavior exhibited by youngsters at home and in the community.

Within the framework of these broad principles, local and state legislators and school officials should consider the following specific measures:

① Use breathalyzer tests to stop alcohol use on school grounds.

School systems could begin to use breathalyzers, through cooperative efforts with local police, on school grounds and at school-sponsored events when alcohol use is suspected. If parents or students refuse, students nonetheless would be suspended, required to obtain counseling, and banned from remaining extracurricular activities for the school year. This measure would offend a few, but it would save teenage lives. Fewer students would risk being caught drinking before or during a school activity, and the majority would welcome clear guidance on a problem that claims too many young lives.

② Encourage parental involvement.

Parents can be encouraged to give up a vacation day each year and spend it in the schools monitoring the student population and assisting teachers and students. Parents need to see what goes on every day to appreciate the position of teachers, and teachers need parents' full and uncompromising support. School systems must clarify the importance of a shared partnership with parents that emphasizes the following expectations in the form of a "parent contract," signed by the parents, acknowledging their full responsibility for their children and support of the school :

- ◆ Parents will ensure that their children come to school daily and punctually, academically and behaviorally ready to learn, with a solid grasp of basic skills and personal qualities.
- ◆ Parents will communicate with the school and give their uncompromising support to school policies and expectations that promote self-respect and self-discipline.
- ◆ Parents will be attentive to their children K-12, nurturing study and organizational skills regarding schoolwork and homework and believing, as every schoolhouse should, that every child can succeed.
- ◆ Parents will set high yet achievable expectations for their children's academic and extra-curricular involvements, monitoring both regularly.

③ Make parents accountable for their disruptive children.

School systems should begin requiring parents of disruptive students to accompany their children to classes. From personal experience, the author knows this produces positive results. Schools also could offer parents of students facing suspension the option of accompanying their children to all classes, including the lunch hour. In lieu of suspension, this would give parents a clear perspective on the responsibility that schools bear and the pressing need to support their children's teachers.

④ Establish community service for disruptive students.

Schools could require suspended students to perform community service for the period of their suspension. They would earn their return to school by demonstrating an understanding of compassion, respect, humility, and responsibility of the sort that might be learned by assisting the elderly at a retirement center, cleaning public restrooms at county buildings or the local hospital, or cleaning up a local community park.

⑤ Make parents of disruptive students pay for time lost.

School systems should charge parents of disruptive students for the inordinate time expended after school by teachers who try to make a positive change in the students' behavior. If, for example, a teacher spends two hours in a particular week conferring with the disruptive child and speaking on the phone with the parent, and if the services of a counselor and administrator are needed, the parent might be billed for the time in salaries and expenses, including any overtime pay, that otherwise would have been spent preparing regular instruction.

⑥ Establish special school programs for habitually disruptive students.

Officials should provide a school within a school or a separate "transitional school" for habitually unruly students placed in the program by school staff. These students would remain in this program, receiving instruction, therapy, and counseling, until a substantive change in behavior was demonstrated. Should their parents refuse this staff recommendation, unruly students would be withdrawn from school, although they would be allowed to apply again for admission to an evening school or another public school, pending approval by school system headquarters. This would send a clear message: the public schools are not to be used to warehouse incorrigibles bent on destroying teaching and learning.

⑦ State and local officials should review—and rewrite if necessary—student discipline codes.

Parents, educators, and local police all can provide recommendations in such a review. But clear expectations with clear consequences need to be communicated to children from elementary through high school. Nearly half the teens in the *USA Weekend* survey said that the best thing their school could do to make them feel safer—and therefore able to learn more—would be to get rid of bad children permanently. Bad students could learn in an alternative setting where they can obtain counseling and a solid education.²³ When respect, self-discipline, and character are rewarded, the students' motivation to learn will increase. Schools will find that a comprehensive code of conduct that is substantive, consistently enforced, and reasonably promulgated will reduce school interruptions, including disrespectful, disruptive, and uncivilized student behavior.

⑧ Make "character education" a part of the school curriculum.

Schools need to make it clear to students that lying, cheating, and stealing are wrong and will not be tolerated and that truth, honesty, and respect for the private property of others are expected at all times and in all circumstances. Dayton, Ohio, for example, has included this approach in each public school. Since the start of the program, Dayton's schools have reported improvements in student test scores, student behavior, and school environment.

23 Ansley, "Safety in Schools," p. 5.

⑨ Require school officials to contact the police immediately when a student is suspected of illegal drug use.

If an officer finds that the student is probably under the influence of drugs, the student should be subject to a drug test on the basis of parental notification and consent. If the parent refuses to consent, the police should follow standard operating procedure and arrest the student under state laws that normally govern illegal drug use.

⑩ Employ retired military personnel to teach and provide administrative assistance.

The United States armed forces offer a superb resource of talent. Men and women, many in their 40s and 50s, often express an interest in working with young people. Many have baccalaureate degrees and substantial training and expertise in scientific, technical, and other areas. Even though the culture of the American military is vastly different from that of the American public school, state and local legislators could encourage or require school systems to be flexible in their certification requirements and encourage these fine people to become involved in education. Many may have an interest in “administrative assistantships,” working with errant youth, assisting with truancy and after-school detentions, coordinating student activities, providing one-on-one instruction in classes and tutoring, or other programs fostering stability and achievement.

⑪ Hire adequate security personnel.

Schools should be hiring, on a full-time basis, more personnel with the relevant experience and training to ensure a secure environment. Interlopers and thugs trespass on school grounds, entering school buildings and disrupting classrooms. If a school has experienced recurring violence, the state and local authorities can force administrators—currently overly concerned with image—to employ the kind of protection that can put teachers, students, administrators, and the community at ease. As noted, a high percentage of students in a recent national survey stated that they would learn more if they felt safer.

BACKUP FROM THE LEGISLATURE

State and local legislators can make substantive efforts to support these changes in school disciplinary procedures. Legislative remedies alone cannot do what families are responsible for doing, which is why lawmakers must continue to emphasize to parents that the education of their children is primarily their responsibility. But state legislatures can and should take a number of actions to reinforce the efforts of parents and school officials to reestablish acceptable behavior. Specifically:

✓ **Legislatures can examine how the public schools are staffed.**

There needs to be a departure from the rigid staffing ratio formulae employed by too many school systems that assign a specific number of teachers for a certain number of students enrolled. It is more appropriate to staff individual schools according to problems or community-specific “at-risk” needs.

- ✓ **Legislatures can ensure that schools report student assaults, possession of drugs and weapons, and other offenses such as theft, arson, and vandalism.**

Delaware's state legislature has passed a measure intended to help school and police to recognize and solve problems. In the first two months of last school year, Delaware recorded 640 individual cases of serious school crime. Of these, 260 were crimes against school employees; 248 were against fellow classmates. An administrator and state representative remarked that, "according to these statistics, it is more dangerous to work in a school than to be educated in one."²⁴

- ✓ **Lawmakers must look seriously into how the public schools are preparing the approximately 70 percent of students for whom college is unlikely.**

Many of these students are bright, talented, and conscientious; they often learn best by application and experience. Legislators should strongly encourage state and local officials to provide substantive school-to-work transition programs for *all* students. This means ensuring that schools provide a challenging curriculum of academic coursework combined with real workplace applications that would allow students to go on to work, trade school, community college, or four-year university. The idea is that high school students will be encouraged to think about career paths, not just to look for a job. It then means preparing these students for trades associated with carpentry, heating and air conditioning, bricklaying, and cosmetology, as well as for the more sophisticated technical fields like fibre optics, trade and telecommunications, health and human services, and manufacturing. The more substantive the program offering, the more effort and initiative exhibited by students, and the less time that must be devoted to combating disruption. Currently, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, most American students about to receive a diploma read so poorly that they appear to be at risk as they become adults. How much might this change for the better if self-respect, honor, and a work ethic were returned to a schoolhouse devoid of disruption? America is the only industrialized nation without a formal system for helping students prepare for work and enter the workforce. Reports the U.S. Department of Labor, "More than half our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a job."²⁵

- ✓ **Lawmakers should encourage schools to maintain course offerings and programs that substantively ensure that students demonstrate proficiency in the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and mathematics, as well as those thinking skills relative to critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, reasoning, and knowing how to learn.**

24 Gerald Buckworth, "Teachers Are Not Immune to School Crime," *Delaware State News*, January 14, 1994.

25 "Building Bridges from School to Work," background paper for "Goals 2000: Educate America" Satellite Town Meeting, April 13, 1993.

There is wide concern over the extent to which many school systems seem to have lost what Ron Edmonds, founder of the Effective Schools Movement, has called a “clear and focused mission.” Unfortunately, some schools are awash with such programs as “multicultural” education and “Afrocentrism.” While a comprehensive curriculum should include the myriad cultures that comprise the fabric of America, some school systems have used the term “multicultural” to “celebrate” diversity by emphasizing differences among ethnicities and attempting to rationalize such things as the wearing of hats and sunglasses indoors, or interrupting the teacher, as appropriate and acceptable.

Many schools are multicultural to the extent that students represent many countries, and these valuable differences in heritage should be studied and understood. The multicultural representation in America’s schools is exciting and rewarding. But American students also need to appreciate and celebrate the nation’s “oneness.” There is no need to invent ersatz educational programs that are simply divisive. The purpose of schooling should be to prepare all youth—including minority youth—to compete in a pluralistic society that measures knowledge and success by academic rather than politically correct indicators. As a black colleague said to me recently, “Holding my child to a different standard in any fashion because he happens to be black is the ultimate racism. When will people understand that?”

Likewise, it seems unwise to immerse minority children in “Afrocentric” instruction, which many scholars—including minorities—have concluded is based on claims that are both unfounded and undocumented. Such “instruction” leads to a confusing and false sense of self-esteem; it demeans learning and further alienates minority children who desperately need to learn how to read, write, speak, and compute. As Jaimie Escalante, the famous California mathematics instructor, observes:

Our schools today...tend to look upon disadvantaged minority students as though they were on the verge of a mental breakdown, to be protected from any undue stress.... Ideas like this are not just false. They are a kiss of death for minority youth and, if allowed to proliferate, will significantly stall the advancement of minorities.²⁶

Learning more about one’s own culture is exciting, wholesome, and edifying, as various ethnic groups have known for years. But, like private violin lessons, it is best pursued after school, and not at taxpayer expense.

✓ **Legislatures should not hesitate to use the power of the purse to support public school discipline.**

Congress has been considering measures to help local school districts develop and implement programs to prevent violence, particularly gun-related violence. The federal government estimates that school crime and vandalism cost taxpayers over \$200 million a year.²⁷ But education is primarily a state and local responsibility. State and local boards of education should monitor their schools closely, and the state legislature

26 Cited in Bennett, *Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, p. 89.

27 Associated Press, “100,000 Students Carry Guns, Teacher Group Says,” *op. cit.*

should take decisive action when any school system shows tolerance for undisciplined behavior. For example, as part of a clear and consistent code of conduct, state legislators may wish to cut off state funds to any local school district that demonstrates a tolerance for disruptive behavior or refuses to expel students who bring guns to school. The ultimate legislative power is the power of the purse.

- ✓ **Lawmakers can require that students in teen parenting programs subsidized with taxpayer dollars be enrolled in free early childhood courses.**

A portion of the welfare check would be contingent on the degree of compliance.

- ✓ **Legislatures could encourage innovative programs such as "professional development schools" run much like a teaching hospital.**

Just as doctors and medical school professionals conduct research and collaborate, working with medical students and providing great patient care, schools could work with university professors to train student teachers. This creates a more professional, nurturing culture in the school. Teachers involved in such programs report that "students get a better education. We find that many minds make better work. The multiple perspectives we get in planning and developing curriculum and teaching strategies are helping our students become better thinkers and learners."²⁸ The more students think and learn, the more active they become in instruction. Youngsters actively involved in instruction feel better about themselves and are not inclined to be disruptive and uncivil to one another.

- ✓ **Lawmakers could examine more systematically the extent to which students benefit from new approaches to schooling in other states.**

Minnesota, for instance, has created "second-chance" high schools for dropouts wishing to return to school outside of their immediate communities. Magnet schools exist in many areas to reach those students underserved by local high schools. A number of states have been experimenting with cooperative college/high school programs. These "middle colleges," as they are called in New York City, have high schools located on university campuses where students can use college resources and obtain college credit for specific coursework. Many districts also have started high-technology schools where students are given the latest in technology with which to access and use data. Strong backs and deft hands are no longer the *sine qua non* of economic vitality.²⁹

- ✓ **Lawmakers should require disruptive or violent students expelled from other school jurisdictions to prove themselves in "transitional" schools before being allowed to return to the public school mainstream.**

28 "The St. Elsewhere of Public Schools," *NEA Today*, December 1993, p. 17.

29 Denis P. Doyle, Bruce S. Cooper, and Roberta Trachtman, "Education Ideas & Strategies for the 1990's," *The American Enterprise*, March-April 1990.

Each public school, by law, ought to be informed if a student with a violent or disruptive past elsewhere seeks admission. In many instances, administrators enroll felons and do not even know it. To be enrolled, the individual should be required to show proof of therapy or enrollment in a counselling program; to complete a written "contract" that specifies his adherence to school rules and regulations; and to be willing first to apply for acceptance at a "transitional" school for a minimum probationary period of one academic year, during which his academic and behavioral progress would be evaluated. Only upon satisfactory completion of the aforementioned steps would the student be allowed to request acceptance to the regular high school. If the administrator approves, the student would continue to be held to his "contract," and his academic and behavioral progress would continue to be monitored and reviewed at 30-day intervals.

- ✓ **Legislatures should require that students receiving "home instruction" due to their disruptive or violent behavior be held accountable for a portion of the cost of such placement.**

Anyone whose disruptive, intractable behavior has warranted "home teaching" should be required to pay a portion of the cost of instruction. This type of student should not be "rewarded" with a better teacher-pupil ratio than that available to the most responsible student in any school—public, private, or parochial.

CONCLUSION

American public school students continue to score lower than their counterparts in other industrialized nations on nearly every level of educational attainment. Employers, colleges and universities, professional schools, and pundits find graduates to be shallow, poorly trained, and lacking in the skills and abilities they need. Since education at all levels is the single most important charge on the public purse, this situation cries out for reform. It makes it all the more important that state legislators take a more active role in educating the nation's youth.

It is not a matter of doling out additional funds; if it were, the corporate community across the United States would have seen evidence of improvement from its support of schools. In fact, research has shown very little connection between dollars spent per pupil and the educational performance of those pupils.³⁰

The educational crisis requires no more national reports, congressional commissions, or *ad hoc* education task forces. What the school system does need is renewed self-respect and a sense of integrity gained from decisive action against the breakdown of civilized behavior in many schools. Disruption steals learning. The schools continue to forsake the individual rights of far too many conscientious students and teachers who deserve an environment conducive to teaching and learning, devoid of disruption and chaos.

³⁰ See Douglas P. Munro, "How to Find Out Where the Money Goes in the Public Schools," Heritage Foundation *State Backgrounder* No. 955/S, August 10, 1993, p. 1.

To the extent that irresponsible and unsupportive parents have been given the impression by educators that schools must continue to tolerate their incorrigible youngsters, and to the further extent that educators and local education agencies have "defined deviancy down" by tolerating poor behavior from school-age youngsters, Pogo was right: the enemy is us! Many today believe that, despite the smattering of successes throughout public schooling, the failure to come to grips with student disruption has made America a nation even more at risk than the original commission proclaimed in 1983. But America can begin the turnaround by placing a premium on teaching youngsters integrity and respect. They will feel better about themselves and will learn very quickly the real meaning of achievement; every child of every ethnicity will benefit.

A palpable interest in this goal by local and state legislators would offer more hope and perhaps more accountability. Improving educational reform as outlined here will produce long-term payoffs, including reduced interference in instruction, reduced drop-out rates, less reliance on costly social programs, and a better-educated workforce.

If we really wish to improve the education of our students, we might begin by improving the conditions under which too many American public school teachers are asked to work and teach. They are genuine heroes who richly deserve the attention and support our local officials and state legislatures have the opportunity to give.

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